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# Letter dated 27 March 2015 from the Permanent Representative of Jordan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith the concept paper for the Security Council briefing on the theme "The role of youth in countering violent extremism and promoting peace" (see annex), which will be held on 23 April 2015.

I should be grateful if the present letter and its annex would be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Dina **Kawar**
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## Annex to the letter dated 27 March 2015 from the Permanent Representative of Jordan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

# The role of youth in countering violent extremism and promoting peace

## Concept paper

In April 2015, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan will convene a high-level open debate on the theme "The role of youth in countering violent extremism and promoting peace".

## Introduction

With a view to preventing terrorism and reducing the appeal of and support for terrorist groups, countering violent extremism efforts include initiatives focused on the prevention of radicalization, recruitment and mobilization of individuals into terrorist groups and becoming foreign terrorist fighters as an essential element in addressing the threat of terrorism to international peace and security. Violent extremism also fuels inter-community tensions, inhibits socioeconomic development and fosters regional and international insecurity.

The appeal of extremist ideologies to youth has increased over the past decade and ever younger foreign terrorist fighters are travelling in unprecedented numbers to join groups like Da`esh. A significant portion of such youth no longer contents itself with ideological sympathies, and decides to join radical and extremist groups. Al-Qaida and its affiliates have understood this reality and have been intensively targeting this demographic, taking advantage of several factors that are conducive to radicalization and violent extremism. This has been noticeable in numerous situations involving Al-Qaida, Da`esh and their affiliates throughout the world. In Mali, some fighters of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa and Ansar Eddine have been as young as 15 years old. While some were recruited as child soldiers, others were indoctrinated with Al-Qaida ideology. The Da`esh propaganda campaign has focused effectively on young candidates through a strategic communications campaign that resorts to footages depicting very young and "proud" fighters in its ranks, in order to attract their peers. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab has been using young fighters in its attacks and piracy acts, while Boko Haram depends on youth recruitment and has recently been using children as young as 8 years old in its suicide attacks.

In the same context, while the involvement of youth could be a part of the challenge related to violent extremism, youths themselves can also be the core of the solution. Urgent action is required at the national, subregional, regional and international levels, in order to address this issue and place youth at the centre of the global agenda to counter violent extremism.

## Why are youth at the centre of the problem?

The rise of radicalization and violent extremism, especially among youth, is one of today's most pressing threats to peace, stability and development. Not only does it threaten security and stability, but when radicalized youth abandon their education and employment and endanger future generations, they derail development efforts and foment community tensions. Today's generation of youth is the largest the world has ever known and of the age group that is highly targeted by terrorist organizations. Radicalization among youth can and should be prevented, starting from an early age, by developing and using appropriate sustainable development strategies that meet their basic needs. Cooperation between all stakeholders is more vital now than ever before, if our ambition is to stop more youth radicalization throughout the world in the years to come.

Although radicalization can happen at any age, young people who are in search of a sense of belonging, purpose and/or identity tend to be more vulnerable to violent extremism and radicalization than any other age group. The challenge we face is that of violent extremists drawing on ideas and grievances that resonate with various audiences in order to recruit and exploit disaffected youth and offer them a false sense of purpose, belonging and identity.

## What are the factors that lead to radicalization among youth?

A number of common denominators contribute to creating an environment that is conducive to terrorist recruitment and youth radicalization. To inform a solution, the international community should recognize the major factors that are conducive to youth radicalization. Push factors, which include socioeconomic and developmental drivers, as outlined in pillar I of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, can be combined with pull factors, like material or social incentives, as well as other related factors, to drive support for extremist groups and ideologies.

### Push factors

#### Unmet expectations

Those who feel that their society as a whole has the least to offer, or who feel that they cannot achieve the goals that they had expected to achieve, are the most vulnerable to radicalization. Violent extremists are taking advantage of formal structures and informal networks and using all communication channels open to them to recruit youth into their organizations. Recruitment into a violent extremist organization may be driven by identified needs of the individual and, in this sense, does not differ from recruitment into any other type of organization. Youth gravitate towards those organizations because of what violent extremism networks may offer in terms of materials and socio-psychological support, such as money, protection and solidarity.

Unemployment and underemployment, as well as poverty, among youth are socioeconomic challenges that are evident in countries where violent extremist organizations operate. In 2013, an estimated 73 million young people were unemployed, according to the International Labour Organization. Also, the economic and social costs of unemployment, long-term unemployment,

discouragement and widespread low-quality jobs for young people continue to rise and undermine economic growth potential. It is easier for violent extremist groups to recruit unemployed youth who see no future for themselves than employed youth. A survey showed that respondents identified the high incidence of unemployment and poverty that prevail in the state as the second most important reason why youth engage in religious-based violence. The living conditions render highly vulnerable youth to manipulation by extremist ideologies.

**Personal trauma**

The experience of loss, through death or injury of a family member, personal injury or negative experiences, can create a "cognitive opening" that makes young people more receptive to violent extremist messaging and recruitment.

**Personal or community grievances**

A number of personal and social factors can contribute to creating conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. Studies suggest that poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and weak family structures make, or contribute to making, young men and women vulnerable to radicalization, as extremist groups can position themselves to address some of these challenges. At the same time, even where extremist group members may not themselves experience these conditions, their activities are presented as responding on behalf of those who do.

Youth radicalization may often result from a combination of contextual and personal factors, such as a sense of alienation, exclusion, marginalization, deprivation, insecurity or victimization, felt on behalf of an individual or community. The conflicts, violence, oppression, corruption, illegitimate and abusive exercise of power, perceived enmities or historical grievances that those individuals endure fuel their exasperation and provide them with a convenient justification to resort to violent extremism. Also, the lack of a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence may contribute to radicalization. Similarly, the failure to integrate youth into local societies may also lead to their becoming vulnerable to extremism.

High levels of illiteracy may also be a contributor to youth radicalization and extremism. While it is evident that illiteracy does not manufacture the bombs that terrorist organizations use, arrest records indicate that the "real armies of suicide bombers and terrorists' foot soldiers" are drawn from such "disadvantaged, stranded populations"; and that poverty, lack of education and indoctrination may contribute to terrorism. Moreover, illiteracy renders young people more susceptible to the messaging and narratives of extremist groups, as they lack the means to verify or challenge the ideas themselves.

Violent extremist groups have been very strategic in exploiting these vulnerabilities through effective recruitment strategies and social media and other online platforms in order to lull potential members into their hands. Such groups can manipulate information and exploit the political and ideological idealism of the youth through the effective use of propaganda. Considering that youth are the biggest consumers of social media, slick videos with soundtracks and messaging in their own language are utilized to engage them, but such tools can also be used to contest the extremists in this space.

## How can the threat be mitigated?

### Addressing conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism

International organizations and local governments need to focus on addressing the conditions that are conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism, as highlighted in the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. This includes by creating social and economic development policies, supporting projects designed to grow local economies, fostering education and promoting youth entrepreneurship and constructive political engagement. In order to do that, international organizations need to partner with local governments to develop strategies and initiatives to give youth the necessary skills, resources and opportunities to succeed. This includes access to quality education and health care, support of family and social networks, political empowerment and availability of employment opportunities. Moreover, although the State has the primary responsibility in addressing the challenges through, inter alia, allowing democratic participation, civic engagement, access to health and social services and economic and employment opportunities, direct engagement by civil societies and non-governmental organizations is essential to engage youth and encourage them to speak against violent extremist networks.

### Strengthening public-private partnerships

More attention should be paid to basic youth developmental needs and the prevention of youth violence, exploitation and neglect. Collaborative efforts between public and private agencies are also needed to provide pro-social opportunities to youth and parents in the most affected communities. This could include partnerships between the media and communities to amplify alternative narratives and moderate voices, and reveal the negative aspects of extremist groups to vulnerable audiences. The Governments should appreciate the importance of a social media campaign in order to counter the messages of radical terrorist organizations. Governments should make use of all available media channels to help counter violent extremist messages and to expose the true nature of those organizations. In addition, engaging young online activists and youth organizations is crucial. Possible initiatives in this regard should include the creation of online networks of young activists and the provision of training in online campaigning against intolerance and discrimination.

### Empowering and educating youth

Governments also need to take part in empowering national youth who speak the local language, understand their culture and are able to contextualize the issues in a way that is relevant and powerful to their people. The right "messenger" is key in discussing the implications of violent extremism within his or her own community and providing outlets for the youth and people affected by this phenomenon. Enhancing community engagement with civic duties, religious leaders and social service groups will provide opportunities for youth to learn about conflict prevention, conflict resolution and dialogue engagement.

Ensuring that young people have access to quality education and support can enhance their abilities to challenge extremist narratives and provide positive alternatives rooted in traditional cultures and practices. Educational institutions,

religious establishments and civil society groups are often unprepared or ill-equipped to address the critical topic of violent extremism. Such institutions need to be empowered to play a targeted and proactive role in preventing this growing threat against youth by promoting peace education. Governments, at all levels, should partner with credible civil society organizations to design and implement effective reorientation programmes for impoverished children and youth, in order to provide them with the support and training they need to function effectively in society. Sports, arts and culture activities and initiatives are also critical vehicles for developing culturally relevant and resonant alternatives to extremist messages and offering young people positive narratives, and they can often effectively leverage existing resources in countries that may be underutilized in this regard.

All stakeholders need to underline the necessity of programmes and initiatives that promote tolerance and coexistence. In order to promote tolerance, States need to initiate religious dialogue and educational initiatives that will provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to understand and reject this radical ideology and promote counter-narratives based on human rights and democracy.

**Supporting youth and youth-oriented organizations**

The potential contribution to, and the inclusion of young people in, effective peacebuilding has received little attention and support. The role of youth is essential for achieving an integrated sustained approach in post-conflict peacebuilding and for ensuring that the needs of all segments of society are taken into account in this phase of strengthening peace and security, as well as building national institutions in the countries emerging from conflicts. The inclusion of youth in peacebuilding requires national policies and strategies that strengthen the capacity and skills of this important category of a society. Countries in conflict or emerging from conflict are encouraged to focus on identifying youth priorities and providing guidance to them, which is key to supporting the critical role that they can play in all peace and security efforts, including mitigating the impact of conflicts on societies.

## How can youth themselves counter violent extremism?

Youth and youth-oriented organizations can play a critical role, as positive role models that influence and inspire peers to challenge violent extremism. Such individuals typically stimulate young people to make sound life choices and to advance their educational outcomes and assist them in developing skills, values and other attributes that encourage citizenship and lead to a full and productive adulthood for the benefit of the community and the economy. Incorporating young leaders into educational, community and workplace settings is important; they can be an influence on their peers and can motivate a vision for peace against violent extremism.

Youth can counter violent extremism by taking part in and leading educational and civil society initiatives that will provide young people with the knowledge and skills needed to understand and reject this radical ideology and to promote counter-narratives based on human rights, tolerance and democracy. Engagement in these programmes will influence their peers to assist in the efforts to promote peace and provide them with a foundation to have an educated attitude towards violent extremism.

Youth can build resilience in combating this phenomenon through the use of information technologies and by contesting extremist narratives, both online and offline. Journalists and social media activists can use their peer influence to tackle extremist ideologies by resisting radical content online and acknowledging biases in the news. However, it is also important to ensure that they have a safe space to do this.

Young women can be powerful agents of change and play a crucial role in developing responses to violence, and challenging and delegitimizing extremist violence. They often have a unique role in families and communities and are often active in public and civil society efforts, and can play important roles in contributing to community resilience. It is essential that strategies be specific and provide resources to empower young women to play such a proactive role in the socioeconomic and educational structures.

## What role can the United Nations play in furthering these efforts?

The United Nations, in particular the Security Council, can play a critical role in addressing this phenomenon. Already, Security Council resolutions, such as resolutions 1624 (2005) and 2178 (2014), highlighted the need to prevent incitement to terrorism and undertake preventive measures to stem the flow of foreign fighters through countering violent extremism. To further build on these objectives and to address the role of youth in countering violent extremism, the Security Council could:

- Request the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate to develop a report with input from relevant actors, including the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team established pursuant to Security Council resolutions 1267 (1999), 1988 (2011) and 1989 (2011), the United Office on Drugs and Crime, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Alliance of Civilizations and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women to develop an in-depth and joint analysis about the nexus between youth, violent extremism and sustainable development, and to include recommendations for measures to address this challenge in the context of implementing resolution 2178 (2014), including through engagement with civil society and private sector
- Call on the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force to work with Member States to support the development of programmes based on this analysis, which focus on youth and countering violent extremism programming
- Call for greater coordination on this issue with relevant United Nations entities, including the United Nations counter-terrorism entities, the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, UNDP and UNESCO
- The World Programme of Action for Youth should include a new priority area that addresses countering violent extremism and terrorism and enhancing youth resilience
- Consider the occasion of the tenth anniversary of resolution 1624 (2014) to highlight efforts to address incitement to terrorism and request the

Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate to facilitate an exchange of lessons learned and good practices on implementation, with a particular focus on youth radicalization and social media.

To frame the Council discussion in April, Member States may wish to address the following topics, among others:

- Specific initiatives in their own countries that are already developed, for and by youth, in order to counter violent extremism among youth
- Implementation of programmes to prevent and counter youth radicalization among youth
- The nexus between youth, violent extremism, socioeconomic issues, sustainable development and employment complications in regard to youth.